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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000427

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PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015

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SUBJECT: SHEIKH CONFIRMS SARG INVOLVEMENT IN ESCALATING
SITUATION IN DAYS PRIOR TO RIOTING

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: An influential Sunni sheikh provided details February 6 that seem to confirm SARG involvement in escalating the situation that led to the violent rioting in Damascus two days earlier, including communications between the PM's office and the Grand Mufti. He also noted that SARG authorities now seem intent on identifying a few scapegoats to be blamed for the incidents. The Danish Ambassador confirmed to us separately that the Minister of the Awqaaf had inflamed the situation the day before the rioting, with his remarks at Friday prayers in a mosque. End Summary.

¶2. (C) , XXXXXXXXXXXX, head of the Abu Noor Islamic Institute and one of the most influential Sunni religious figures in Damascus, provided PolChief February 6 with his assessment of SARG involvement in the run-up to the violent February 4 demonstrations (and its reaction in their aftermath). He noted that PM Naji al-Otri several days before the demonstrations instructed the Grand Mufti Sheikh Hassoun to issue a strongly worded directive to the imams delivering Friday sermons in the mosques of Damascus, without setting any ceilings on the type of language to be used. Hassoun complied with the order. (Note: Several Muslim contacts have confirmed that sermons based on these instructions were delivered, criticizing the publishing of the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed, and condemning the actions of the Danish, Norwegian, and French governments. An Egyptian diplomat reported that the sermon he heard was critical but not inciteful.)

¶3. (C) PM Otri also instructed Hassoun and Minister of the Awqaf Ayoubi that if diplomatic representatives from the Danish and Norwegian Embassies attempted to deliver apologies to them and to seek their assistance in defusing the situation, they were to take a hard line and insist that the only way forward was for the PM's of the two countries to issue official apologies.

¶4. (C) The banners put up in Rawda Square were obviously put up with SARG permission. When XXXXXXXXXXXX had attempted to put up banners in that area on a previous occasion, to announce some Muslim-Christian dialogue effort, they were removed immediately and he was told it was a "security area" and he needed permission from the governorate of Damascus to put up such banners because of all the diplomatic missions and protective security forces in the area.

¶5. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX noted that one of the key organizers of the march was Ammar Sahloul, a wealthy businessman (money trader) with close ties both to the regime and to the Grand Mufti.

XXXXXXXXXXXXX suspects him of being an agent for the SARG. He said that Sahloul had been one of the people involved in sending out text messages a few days before the demonstrations, inviting people to come.

¶6. (C) After the Danish Embassy was attacked (along with the Swedish and Chilean missions housed in the same building) and the Norwegian Embassy was torched, Syrian security officers acted much more resolutely to prevent damage at the French Embassy. XXXXXXXXXXXXX's friend Ayoubi, the Minister of the Awqaaf, was on the scene trying to calm the demonstrators and get them to disperse. Ayoubi told XXXXXXXXXXXXX that the senior Syrian security officer then informed him "That's it. Tell them to disperse or we will use live ammunition" to stop the rioting and to prevent them from storming the Embassy.

¶7. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX assessed that the SARG allowed the rioting to continue for an extended period and then, when it felt that "the message had been delivered," it reacted with serious threats of force to stop it. He described the message to the U.S. and the broader international community as follows: "This is what you will have if we allow true democracy and allow Islamists to rule." To the Islamic street all over the region, the message was that the SARG is protecting the dignity of Islam, and that the SARG is allowing Muslims freedom on the streets of Damascus they are not allowed on the streets of Cairo, Amman, or Tunis.

¶8. (C) After the rioting, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said he was visited by representatives of several SARG security agencies, including Political Security and Syrian Military Intelligence. He was summoned by director of the General Intelligence Directorate Ali Mamluk. The tone of all the questioning indicates the SARG is now energetically looking for scapegoats to blame for the rioting, said , XXXXXXXXXXXXX. He said he surprised Mamluk by acknowledging that a number of students from his institute had participated in the early stages of the demonstrations but had withdrawn before the violence started at the Danish Embassy.

¶9. (C) The Danish Ambassador told Emboffs February 6 that he had met with the Minister of the Awqaaf on February 2 (and separately with the Grand Mufti) to explain the Danish position and ask for help in cooling tempers. He noted that the while the Mufti issued a helpful statement, the ministers reported comments on Friday in a mosque in the upscale Malki neighborhood only served to inflame the situation. His repeated efforts to with the MFA the days before the rioting to get beefed up security for the Embassy proved fruitless, he noted.

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